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Posted on Fri, Apr. 15, 2005

## Bush seeks to split up Amtrak

States would run regional lines. The U.S. would aid upkeep costs.

By Chris Mondics

Inquirer Washington Bureau

**WASHINGTON** - The Bush administration proposed yesterday that Amtrak be dismantled and replaced by regional, intercity rail lines run by the states.

Under the proposal, the federal government would no longer help pay the cost of operating national rail service, but it would share maintenance costs with the states. States would have the option of contracting with private companies to operate trains on their routes. On its face, the plan would seem to spell the end for some of the service provided by Amtrak, particularly long-distance lines in remote, rural areas where ridership is sparse and federal subsidies are critical.

For the Northeast Corridor under the proposal, Pennsylvania, New Jersey and Delaware would join with five other states and the District of Columbia to operate service between Washington and Boston, the most heavily traveled of Amtrak's route.

"I have served as a member of the Amtrak board of directors for four years," Transportation Secretary Norman Y. Mineta wrote in a letter to congressional leaders, "and everything I have learned during that time tells me that Amtrak cannot survive as a viable mode of transportation without structural reform. As a virtually unchanged creation of the 1960s, Amtrak has not evolved with the rest of the transportation sector."

Although the Bush administration pushed two years ago to break up Amtrak, it has in the last few months ratcheted up the pressure. For the first time, the White House announced this year that it would seek to eliminate subsidies for Amtrak in the next fiscal year, acknowledging that the cut, were it to be carried out, would force the rail line into bankruptcy.

Mineta, meantime, has made several high-profile speaking tours around the country making the argument that Amtrak should be restructured.

But Amtrak has many congressional supporters, and the rail line has survived other near-death experiences.

Philadelphia's 30th Street Station is one of the busiest stations in the country and nearly 10,000 riders get on and off Amtrak trains there daily.

The White House proposal, which came in the form of proposed legislation sent to Capitol Hill yesterday, drew a sharp response from congressional critics, who said the Bush administration, rather than seeking to reform Amtrak, was simply trying to shift responsibility to the states.

"This latest gimmick by the President - to claim federal responsibility by lowering the numbers and shifting the cost burdens to states and communities - is ill-fated, ill conceived and just plain wrong," said Sen. Jon Corzine (D., N.J.). "The economic health and quality of life in New Jersey, the northeast region and the nation depend on a healthy operating national rail system."



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Sen. Frank Lautenberg (D., N.J.) said that the proposal would "bankrupt the system by cutting off all federal investment, which will literally bring the trains to a screeching halt."

A spokeswoman for Sen. Rick Santorum (R., Pa.) said that he supported continued funding for Amtrak but that he had not yet taken a position on the restructuring plan.

Sen. Arlen Specter (R., Pa.) said: "I do not see how it is realistic to even partially privatize Amtrak. If the administration has a proposal, I would be willing to take a look at it, but I start off very skeptical."

Amtrak officials did not return calls for comment yesterday.

The Bush administration proposal, called the Passenger Rail Investment Act, calls for eight Northeastern states - Maryland, Delaware, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, New York, Connecticut, Rhode Island and Massachusetts - and the District of Columbia to jointly operate the service between Boston and Washington.

The federal government would share the cost of maintenance and capital improvements along the route but provide nothing in the way of operating subsidies.

The federal government would lease the tracks and other facilities to a regional agency formed by the states. That agency would have authority to contract with Amtrak, or a private company, to provide passenger rail service along the route.

A similar arrangement would be used for service on Amtrak's 17 long-distance lines around the country.

Whether these lines survive would be determined to a great extent by the states that are served by them. If there is enough ridership, presumably the states will press hard to keep the service running, said Robyn Boerstling, a spokeswoman for the Transportation Department.

She said that under the proposal, transportation planners had little doubt that service would continue in the Northeast Corridor and along heavily traveled routes in the Midwest and on the West Coast, but declined to make predictions about other Amtrak services.

## Amtrak Facts

With 3.8 million arriving and departing passengers annually, 30th Street Station is the nation's second-busiest rail terminal, after New York's Pennsylvania Station.

Amtrak serves more than 500 stations in 46 states, on more than 22,000 miles of tracks.

On weekdays, Amtrak operates up to 265 trains a day, excluding commuter trains.

Amtrak began service May 1, 1971, when Clocker No. 235 left

New York's Penn Station at 12:05 a.m. bound for Philadelphia.

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